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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model of collaborative graduate distance education that has been facilitated by the Center for Continuing Education and Summer Programs at the University of Montana and designed to provide graduate training for professionally isolated classroom teachers and administrators. Thirty practicing elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers, who live and work in rural Montana, comprised the first cohort. Three interactive delivery systems, providing such student services as distance registration, access to library holdings, video use, electronic-mail accounts, delivery of course files and documents, and facsimile access, were made available. Course work was designed around six instructional themes--evolution of the curriculum and instruction process; instructional design and technology planning; program evaluation; special education and law; learning and support systems; and cross-cultural issues and diversity. These themes were intended to provide a basis for the development of "professional conversation" among educators. The program was tested by requiring students to write an administrative ideals paper and to engage in an educational site interview. Additionally, 22 students completed a questionnaire that assessed personal participation in professional and community activities. All indicated that the program had expanded their understanding of the professional and personal qualities needed by school administrators and the importance of the teacher role. (Contains 20 references.) (CH)

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A COLLABORATIVE DISTANCE GRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY FOR BUILDING THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY WITHIN SCHOOLS

ED 406 358

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A COLLABORATIVE DISTANCE GRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY FOR BUILDING THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY WITH SCHOOLS

Introduction

Current school reform efforts target structural and curricular changes and give little attention to the dynamics of teacher actions and decision making (Louis et al, 1996a). Sergiovanni (1994) argues that effective school reform must be augmented by the formation of strong **professional communities** of teachers and administrators in schools if reform and restructuring activities are to be truly effective for collective school learning.

Louis et al (1996a) define professional communities of teachers in schools by five characterizations that emphasize the need for teachers to work together with their peers and school administrators. These characterizations include:

1. Shared norms and values: an affirmation by the members of the school community through language and actions of their common assumptions about children, learning, teaching and teachers' roles, the importance of interpersonal connectedness, and a commitment to the collective good of the school;
2. Reflective dialogue: promotes teachers' awareness of their practice and its consequences, with a communal commitment to regular and consistent conversations among teachers about academic, curricular, and instructional concerns of practice within the school as well as on issues of student development and progress;

3. De-privatization of practice: teachers commit to a public practice of their profession and share and trade roles as mentors, advisers, or specialists when giving and receiving assistance from peers;
4. Collective focus on student learning: teacher discussions and actions center on students' opportunity to learn and benefits derived from collaborative efforts within the school; and
5. Collaboration: collaborative efforts, an outgrowth of reflective dialogue and deprivatized practice, bolster shared understandings and reinforce the interrelationships within the school.

The formation and implementation of schoolwide professional communities require the collaborative interaction of empowered teachers and school leaders. Empowering teachers to take significant roles in shared decision making processes foster an environment that encourages them to interact with each other and to take stands on issues. Shortt (1994) notes:

> Teachers must resolve conflicts with colleagues; they must come to decisions they can work with, even if they are not in agreement. They must identify options, understand the consequences of each option, and select the option that will be the most beneficial to students and the school at large. (p.41)

Equally important, the knowledge base of teachers must include information about team dynamics, conflict resolution, budget/fiscal management, procurement issues, technical expertise in the use of computers for both learning and school operations, negotiations,

and consensus decision making (Short, 1994). The development of schoolwide professional communities will also require that school principals "lead from the center rather than from a position at the top of an organizational hierarchy" (Louis et al, 1996a, p.18). This new configuration of leadership will dictate a new image of the school principal as intellectual leader and will emphasize a connection "with the world of pedagogical ideas, educational research, and the expertise of others" (Louis et al, 1996a, p.18). From whence will the foundation for providing this new dynamic for the creation of professional communities in schools, so necessary for effective restructuring, reform, and revitalization, spring?

This paper delineates a model of effective collaboration by two departments within a School of Education (The University of Montana) in the graduate training of both advanced prepared classroom teachers and aspiring school administrators within a single format of distance education as the delivery mode. Further, this paper will present how graduate students in this distance graduate degree program in education are personally and collectively developing the foundations of the professional community within their own schools as a result of their professional development and interaction in this graduate degree cohort distance program.

Background: University Restructuring and Distance Education, Collaborative Degree Delivery and Infrastructure, and Collaborative Degree Design

Restructuring of the Montana State University System and Distance Education

Structural reorganization of the Montana State University System, effected in January, 1994, through administrative merger has resulted in a single unified state system composed of two comprehensive doctoral universities (The University of Montana at Missoula and Montana State University at Bozeman) , four (four year) administratively merged colleges(Northern Montana College-MSU, Montana State University-Billings, Western Montana College-UM, and Montana Tech-UM), two higher education centers at Helena and Great Falls, Montana), and the system integration of five former vocational-technical institutions as colleges of technology. Restructuring of the Montana State University System has highlighted the efficacy of information technologies in making all academic programs of the system available to citizens of the state at times and places conducive to their professional and family obligations.

Distance courses and academic programs within the Montana State University System have been offered via METNET (Montana Educational Television Network), the State of Montana's interactive compressed two way audio and video system. This network is installed in fourteen sites across the state. Individual campuses have made use of the system in varying degrees.

At The University of Montana, the delivery of distance courses and graduate degree programs has been facilitated through the cooperative and collaborative planning efforts of the Center for Continuing Education and Summer Programs (hereafter referred to as The Center) and constituent graduate units at the main campus. The Center has provided and facilitated the necessary infrastructure and planning for delivery of graduate degree programs via a distance format, and cooperating graduate departments have

provided the faculty resource base and programmatic control and expertise needed to deliver accredited programs. Concomitantly, The Center has played an important and vital role in operationalizing the higher education centers at Helena, MT and Great Falls, MT, working with officials at these sites to provide access to all resources of The University of Montana ongoing professional development courses and graduate degree programs.

Collaborative Degree Delivery and Infrastructure: The Master of Education Degree

An assessment by The Center of the postgraduate educational needs of school personnel in western and central Montana, specifically in rural populated areas around Helena, Montana, evidenced a need for graduate education in advanced pedagogy and technology (Curriculum and Instruction) for classroom teachers and graduate education for school personnel contemplating careers in educational administration and supervision (Educational Leadership). Enrollments to sustain two distinct graduate degree programs that would fulfill the university system restructuring mandate for program accessibility and that would meet the distinct educational needs of school personnel in the region "at a distance" proved to be insufficient.

A cooperative venture to address the postgraduate needs of school personnel in rural central and western Montana was initiated in the fall semester of 1994 by The Center with the dean of the School of Education (The University of Montana), the leadership (chairs) of the departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Leadership and Counseling, and the combined faculties of each department. Through a succession of plenary meetings and departmental deliberations conducted during the 1994-95 academic

year by the faculties of the two departments, a cooperative degree program, combining the essential programmatic elements from each academic area, was designed. Delivery of the distance Master of Education degree program at the higher education center at Helena, Montana, commenced with the 1995 fall semester.

The Graduate Education Task Force (1996) of the University of Montana has carefully noted that "without the necessary technological infrastructure, it is impossible to serve students, either on or off campus, through distributed delivery systems" (p.9). Infrastructure for this collaborative program is provided by The Center through the interactive use of human and technological resources. An Extern Graduate Program Officer, working out of The Center, is entrusted with the tasks of "development and implementation of all the logistics associated with each course offering; interfacing with institutional representatives from the higher education center and academic coordinators and faculty from the School of Education; monitoring all student services to ensure that they are working appropriately; assisting with financial aid problems, course evaluation distribution and analysis; and a variety of student concerns" (Kindrick et al, 1996, p.6). The academic and regulatory integrity of the degree program is ensured through the work of two academic coordinators from each department who have been cooperatively responsible for all academic aspects of the program, including graduate admissions, advisement according to programmatic emphasis (classroom and/or school administration), and identification of all instructional personnel.

Three interactive delivery systems are being utilized in the electronic transmission of courses to students at the higher education center in Helena, Montana. These systems

include: (1) METNET, the State of Montana's two way compressed interactive video system; (2)PictureTel, a desktop videoconferencing system that enables students and faculty to interact via audio, video, and software sharing applications; and (3) ProShare, an interactive Windows based communication network for sharing applications and documents between faculty and students.

Specific student services include: distance registration, access to library holdings and resources, establishment and maintenance of E-mail accounts, delivery of course files and documents, video use, and fax accessibility. Access to Internet services at the higher education center is provided to each student in order to facilitate interaction with faculty members and advisors and to increase research capabilities. Internet and data based networks have provided access to the main campus library and to interlibrary loan services through the Montana University System and the Montana State Library. Additional arrangements at the local level in Helena, Montana, have enabled students to access the resources of the library at Carroll College, a private Catholic four year liberal arts institution. Access to faculty is maintained via telephone and through E-mail and fax connections during regularly scheduled faculty office hours.

Collaborative Degree Design : Faculty Governance and Participation

The cooperative design of this degree program provides academic content and structure that is beneficial to the attainment of the professional goals outlined by the graduate students and provides a proven support system of delivery (cohort design) that is

attuned to the needs of professional growth and development and to student persistence and completion of the graduate program (Reynolds, 1993; Roberts, 1993).

Development of this collaborative distance graduate degree program is organized by the School of Education under its NCATE accredited graduate degree program in Curriculum Studies, a degree granting program operated under the auspices of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Course work for the degree is comprised of essential courses from the departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Leadership and Counseling that provide a pedagogical and/or administrative focus for students. Academic work from this degree program can be applied toward advanced teacher certification and school administrator licensure in the State of Montana. Thirty-seven (37) graduate semester credits and a written comprehensive examination are required for the degree, and course work is delivered over six semesters. Six graduate semester credits (two crossed listed courses-EDLD/C&I) are offered one night a week (on Tuesday by agreement of the members of the graduate cohort) from 4:00 to 10:00 p.m. at the higher education center in Helena.

Course work for the degree is designed around six instructional themes that have been determined by the two cooperating departments within the School of Education to provide a basis for the development of "the professional conversation" among educators. This programmatic framework for graduate education of teachers and administrators has been cited as a basis for substantive reform and restructuring in contemporary education (Boyd, 1996; Louis et al, 1996a). Following is the programmatic and timeline framework that is being followed by the first cohort group.

Semester 1 (Fall'95): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Evolution of the Curriculum and Instruction Process

C&I/EDLD 504	History of American Education (3)
C&I/EDLD 551	Foundations of Curriculum and Instruction(3)

Semester 2 (Spring'96): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Instructional design and Technology Planning

C&I 515	Computer and Technological Applications in Education (3)
EDLD 595	Strategic Planning for Technology (3)

Semester 3 (Summer'96): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Program Evaluation and Continuous Renewal

C&I/EDLD 520	Research and Program Evaluation (3)
EDLD 550	Foundations of Educational Leadership(3)

Semester 4 (Fall'96): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Special Education and Law

C&I 518	Inclusion and Collaboration (3)
EDLD	School Law(3)

Semester 5 (Spring'97): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Learning and Support Systems

C&I 652	Issues in Curriculum and Instruction (3)
Counseling 565	School Counseling, Program Development and Supervision (3)

Semester 6 (Summer I'97): 6 Graduate Credits

Theme: Cross-Cultural Issues and Diversity

C&I 514	Education Across Cultures (3)
EDLD 552	Supervision and Evaluation of Public School Educators (3)

Semester 6 (Summer II '97): 1 Graduate Credit

Theme: Comprehensive Examination

C&I/EDLD 596 Comprehensive Examination (1)

Only tenured and tenure track faculty from each of the cooperating departments comprise the instructional staff for the distance graduate degree program. An important programmatic aspect of this degree program is that faculty team teach within the identified themes of the instructional program in order to model collaborative professional interaction and outcomes and to provide a knowledge base and environment for student exchanges, exclusive of program emphasis (teaching or administration).

Participation by faculty in the distance graduate program is on a voluntary basis. Faculty who teach in the program may select from two faculty workload options: (1) teach a course that is part of the program as part of the regular faculty load assigned by the core department, or (2) teach a course that is part of the program as "extra to regular faculty load" and receive additional remuneration based upon an agreed faculty scale financed by the Center. The Center remunerates the department whose faculty may choose to teach a course as part of the regular assignment in order to provide a "buy-out" for that faculty member from regularly assigned campus courses. This remuneration also includes a fee which goes directly to the faculty member for the development of the new distance-formatted course. Faculty members who select to teach in the program as "extra to faculty load" execute a contract with The Center for the teaching of the scheduled course. These faculty members are not exempt from regular campus assignments. Additionally, The

Center provides the services of an instructional design specialist to assist faculty with technical assistance during the delivery of the course. Too, a site coordinator is financed by The Center at the higher education center in Helena, MT to interface between the main campus.

Building the Foundation for the Professional Community within Schools: Confronting Professional Isolation and Professional Development

Confronting Professional Isolation

The nature of "teacher work" and "principal work" in schools is problematic, in part, because of the historical development of the teaching profession and the bureaucratic nature of school management (Sergiovanni, 1991; Short and Greer, 1997). Little (1982) has noted that teachers are isolated in the conduct of their work in most school environments because they have little contact and lack input into what happens in the school outside of their respective classrooms. Rosenholtz (1985) credits this isolation as the major impediment to successful teaching, and Little (1982) credits the lack collegiality in teaching to the effects of this systematic isolation of teachers as professionals.

The endemic effects of this isolation take its toll on both teachers and principals in their professional interactions (Zielinski and Hoy, 1983; Rosenholtz, 1985; Sergiovanni, 1991; Frase and Sorenson, 1992; Short and Greer, 1997). Among these effects are: (1) feelings of inadequacy and insecurity; (2) lack of trust among principals and teachers (3) less sharing among teachers and principals as professionals engaged in the same

pursuit; (4) competition among teachers and less collaborative and cooperative ventures for resources and time; and (5) less teacher involvement in the work life of the school. Ashton and Webb (1986) observe that this professional isolation can contribute to the need by teachers to adopt the status quo and to avoid situations in which prevailing norms of school life are questioned and confronted. The residual effect is that teachers accept their own lack of empowerment in the work place of the school and lose the creativity, commitment, and energy that they can contribute to the betterment of instructional activities and improvement (Frase and Sorenson, 1992).

Sergiovanni (1994) observes that consistent and on-going relations and communications between teachers and principals in schools are important ingredients in effectively carry out important instructional and professional obligations and duties. A number of researchers (National Center for Effective Schools, 1990; Liberman and Miller, 1990; Bredeson, 1994) have chronicled the significance and importance of collegial interactions among school personnel for promoting and institutionalizing changes within schools. That teachers and principals must be actively involved in "professional dialogue" among themselves to effect substantive change for school improvement and student learning is a recognized foundation for overall school effectiveness (National Center for Effective Schools, 1990).

Professional Development

Futrell (1994) has defined professional development as "deliberate learning activities undertaken by individual teachers or groups of teachers to improve policy,

curriculum, or their professional knowledge and skills with a view toward more effectively teaching all students " (p. 125). As a dimension of teacher empowerment, Short and Rinehart (1992) contend that professional development activities provide teachers with opportunities to grow and develop professionally, to learn continuously, and to expand their own skills through the work life of the school. Professional development activities create a sense of self-efficacy in teachers. Teachers perceive themselves to possess the skills and abilities to affect student learning; they feel competent in developing effective instructional programs for students; and they feel that they can effect changes in student learning and in the learning environment (Short and Greer, 1997). Futrell (1994) observes:

> Teachers...in professional development programs can identify ideas and concerns that warrant immediate or long range attention. Teachers know the students and the schools on which the reforms have an impact. They know their own strengths and weaknesses. By embracing and respecting teachers as professionals who are part of the reform effort, instead of individuals on whom the reform is imposed, teachers' attitudes and behaviors change from "this too shall pass" to "how can we really make our schools better". Empowering teachers to become leaders of reform means ensuring that they share in the responsibility and authority of transforming schools. (p.125)

Testing the Efficacy of a Distance Graduate Degree Program: An Investigation in Building the Professional Community in Schools

Profile of the Distance Graduate Degree Cohort

Thirty (30) practicing teachers who work and live in western and central Montana comprise the distance graduate degree cohort. These teachers work in elementary, middle, and secondary schools in central and western Montana. Fourteen (14) students are

pursuing a programmatic emphasis in Educational Leadership that will prepare them as school administrators. The remainder of the students (16) are pursuing an emphasis in Curriculum and Instruction. This cohort of students represents the first group of graduate students who will have received their complete graduate education via distance from the School of Education at The University of Montana. Instructional facilities for this degree program are situated at the higher education center headquartered at the Helena College of Technology (Helena, MT).

Research and Theory Development

Louis et al (1996b) note that the professionalism of teachers, the professional interaction between school administrators and teachers, and teacher involvement in sustained professional groups are critical ingredients to the empowerment and commitment of teachers and to the success of school reform and restructuring efforts initiated by school leaders. In testing the efficacy of this distance graduate degree program in education as a conduit for the foundational development of the "professional community" in schools where the graduate students were situated, three assumptions were made: (1) that the cohort nature of the distance program would provide a supportive and systematic forum for engagement of students in discussions relative to educational problems, issues, and reform efforts taking place at their individual site schools; (2) that the proximity afforded by the distance nature of the program would serve as a catalyst for more personal communications between teachers, school administrators, and other school stakeholders; and (3) that more "professionalized teachers and potential leaders" would

feel more empowered and skilled to serve on school site committees and to engage in extramural discussions relating to reform and/or innovations at their schools.

A "positioned subject" approach was utilized in reporting the development of the foundations of a professional community in the site schools and school districts of the graduate students enrolled in the distance degree program. This approach provided a unique perspective from which to conduct and analyze the research. A focus was placed how students viewed the efficacy of their graduate training as a means to: (1) enlighten and broaden their understanding of educational practice and administration in addressing school issues, problems, and the process of change and reform; and (2) empower them to be participants and change agents in addressing educational issues, problems, and the process of change and reform at their site schools.

Consonant with the "positioned subject approach" employed in this investigation, graduate students in this study wrote a "Reflective Administrative Ideals Paper" and conducted a "Leadership Site Interview" during the spring semester (1996) as requirements for a course in Educational Leadership that was scheduled for the summer (1996). Because of the dual preparatory nature of this distance graduate degree program (Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Leadership), the focus of the "Reflective Administrative Ideals Paper" had its basis in the programmatic emphasis selected by each student. Following is an outline of the questions and issues that were addressed by each student in writing the "Administrative Ideals Paper" by programmatic emphasis:

<u>Curriculum and Instruction Emphasis</u>

1. What personal skills do I bring to the classroom which I feel make me an effective teacher?

2. What contributions do I believe I can make to the revision and advancement of curriculum in my school and/or school district?

3. What knowledge base, information, skills(s), and/or proficiencies do I believe I must acquire in order to become a "Master Teacher" and to become a curriculum leader in my school and/or school district?

Educational Leadership (Administration) Emphasis

1. What personal qualities do I bring to the potential practice of educational leadership?

2. What contributions do I believe I can make to the effective organization and functioning of an educational setting?

3. What knowledge base, information, skill(s), and/or proficiencies do I believe I must acquire in order to become a potentially effective educational leader?

The "Educational Site Interview" required that each student engage a school principal in a conversation about the operations of the school site, the principal's philosophy of education and vision, and the challenges facing the school principalship as perceived by the principal being interviewed. Students could interview their own site principals, select a principal at another school site, or interview a principal at a different site and level at which they aspired to work. As part of the closure to the interview process, students were required to obtain the principal's signature on the verification form provided as part of the course requirements. Data supporting the findings of this research were gleaned from the perspectives of students who submitted their two required course exercises in writing and from a focused dialogue which took place within the context of the Educational Leadership course during the 1996 summer class session. All thirty students in the program participated in the writing assignments and in the focused dialogue session. Additionally, perspectives gleaned from a questionnaire survey administered during the 1996 fall semester provided focused perspectives from the graduate students in

the program relating to their learning and professional growth as a result of the program and to their involvement in committee and/or reform efforts at their schools. Data collected from twenty-two completed questionnaires form the basis from which further student perspectives were extrapolated.

Reflective Administrative Ideals Paper

All thirty students enrolled in the cohort program, completed a written reflective administrative ideals paper. Fourteen papers emphasized an orientation toward preparation for school leadership positions. Sixteen papers emphasized an orientation toward preparation for advanced classroom pedagogy. Several distinctive themes emerged relating to the programmatic emphases of students.

Both students in the school leadership and classroom tracks delineated similar list of "personal skills" that they felt made them effective teachers or that would make them potentially good leaders. These major personal qualities included: (1) caring for the best interests and welfare of all students; (2) being a good listener; (3) being able to work cooperatively and collaboratively with different groups of school stakeholders; and (4) having a willingness to be a strong advocate for their teachers and students.

Students with a classroom emphasis in the program overwhelmingly believed that the major contribution they could make to the revision and advancement of curriculum in their school and/or their school district included: (1) the ability to experiment with different teaching strategies that addressed individual student needs, and (2) the ability to work cooperatively with other teachers in delivering educationally sound programs for students. Three major contributions to organizational effectiveness surfaced among

students with a school leadership emphasis in the program. These students believed they possessed: (1) good organizational and management skills; (2)good public relations skills; and (3) the ability to motivate others through a cooperative and collaborative vision for a school.

Both groups of students converged in their needs to become more technologically literate for classroom practices and administrative purposes. Leadership students expressed a need to become proficient in areas of school law and school budgeting procedures.

The Educational Site Interview

All thirty students enrolled in the cohort program completed a site interview with a school principal. The majority of students interviewed their own school principal. The average amount of time that each student spent interviewing a principal averaged one and a half hours. Students were generous in their praise for the time principals gave to the interview process, despite hectic and busy schedules.

Students, without exception, marveled at the complexity of duties and interactions navigated by principals even during the course of a single day. Frustrations commonly cited by principals in the written interviews submitted and discussed by cohort students include: (1) the inability to perform teacher evaluations in an effective and timely manner; (2) little time to confer with teachers on important issues; (3) budgeting restraints which curtailed important curriculum initiatives, especially technology oriented tasks; (4) increasing paper work which distracted from the real business of school life; (5) growing school disciplinary problems; (6) inability to motivate and involve a substantial numbers

ofdparents in school related activities; and (7) growing family problems which interfered with school effectiveness.

The Questionnaire Survey

Twenty-two students (73%) completed and anonymously submitted the questionnaire for this investigation. Numbers of years in teaching by respondents ranged from two years to 25 years. Of the twenty-three respondents, twelve students indicated that they planned careers in school administration and ten students planned to remain in the classroom after completing their graduate studies.

All twenty-two students (100%) agreed that their graduate course work, combined with their interactions with their peers in the cohort had, expanded and deepened their perspectives and understanding of the professional and personal qualities needed by an effective school administrator and of the important and crucial role that teachers could play in the current reform and restructuring movement in their individual schools. Respondents listed the following personal qualities that they deemed necessary for the effective school leader: (1) Vision and Leadership skills; (2) Public Relations skills; (3) Organizational and managerial skills; (4) Knowledge of curriculum and learning styles of students; and (5) Working collaboratively with other school people

Journeying Toward the Professional Community

Sixty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that they had become active and involved in activities and initiatives either at their school or within their school district as a result of their enrollment in the distance degree cohort program. While slightly over percent said that they would have probably become involved in such activities to some

extent without benefit of the cohort program, twenty-seven percent indicated that they would not have become involved in such activities without benefit of the cohort program. Over fifty percent of the student respondents characterized their roles in school related activities and initiatives as being "leadership type" situations.

Following are statements illustrative of the contributions made by respondents who have become involved in specific activities related to school improvement and other initiatives within their school or school district as a result of their participation in the cohort program.

> *I have helped to reduce the discipline load of the principal and assistant principal so that they can more fairly evaluate teachers. In the past, they've only observed for a very short amount of time.*
>
> *Not only have I provided leadership, but I've been able to share my knowledge of the principal's many responsibilities and develop empathy for that role.*
>
> *Since I am a beginning teacher and a member of the cohort group, I've added some newer and different views, ideas, insights, and opinions. I am more "up-to-date" than many of my colleagues.*
>
> *I have always been an advocate for the library. I now have a better understanding of other areas in education where we need to improve our district--such as in technology and evaluation processes. I am able to make suggestions as to how to move these areas along.*
>
> *As a member of various committees and teams, I feel that I have been able to provide some level of expertise in matters which I have researched, or have learned about from course work or from interactions with my cohort.*
>
> *A greater understanding and appreciation of my role as a leader has helped my confidence level. I feel that I am more effective in the roles I take on.*
>
> *I am much more knowledgeable about current educational trends, and I feel more confident in expressing my opinion.*

I have contributed leadership, consensus making, and facilitated methods for meeting goals and objectives.

I've assisted in the renewal of my school's mathematics department and in the development of school/business partnership.

I have assisted in the development of a district wide plan for ESEA federal programs and I have become a sexual harassment workshop trainer.

I have involved myself in my school's crisis response team's work.

Articulating the "Professional Community"

All respondents (100%) indicated that they had become more keenly aware of the need and importance of developing working conversations among their fellow educators at school and within their schools districts about new and recurring problems and issues. Seventy-three percent of respondents indicated that they had played a role initiating conversations at their school site or within their school districts about important educational issues. Prominent issues in which respondents have engaged fellow teachers, principals, and district leaders include: Special Education/Inclusion (50%), Curriculum and technology (41%), Teacher and School Evaluations (40%), Student Discipline (40%), and School Budget and Facilities (38%).

The Professional Community: Reaching Common Understandings

Seventy-three percent (73%) of respondents indicated that they and fellow educators had arrived at some common understandings and agreements upon which to take further action for the benefit of their students and schools. Following is a representative sampling of the comments provided by respondents:

We've started the Montana Behavior Initiative in our school and we've seen drastic changes in the numbers of fights and other

discipline problems.

Parents cannot be forced to participate in school activities where they feel uncomfortable or judged.

We need to empower students and affirm the dignity of human life instead of constantly judging students by their test scores. The goal of education in every arena should be to prepare students to live with dignity and purpose. We need to be in the business of teaching knowledge, but also teaching how to channel knowledge to human ends.

The administrator is extremely important in creating a positive and safe school environment. he/she must be supported.

Inclusion is for "all" of our students.

Technology is a wonderful tool, but it is not a substitute for teaching

Given the recent changes in top level management positions in our district, the faculty in my building (five of whom are in this cohort) has called into question and challenged some of the decisions which will affect our program. We have presented a united from when meeting with district supervisory personnel.

While fifty percent of the respondents indicated that professional discussions of school issues and problems occurred "both formally and informally" in their schools, only thirty percent of respondents indicated that there school communities held regular and productive conversations.

Summary and Discussion

Students seeking advanced preparation for classroom teaching and applications and students seeking eventual licensure as school principals comprised the enrollment of this distance graduate degree program. This uniform track of graduate education has

confirmed mutual identities and sharings among students and has provided insightful clues and information about what might termed "disparate lives" among fellow educators.

Students in both tracks expressed a need to be more technologically literate and versed as a means of exploring innovative strategies for teaching and management possibilities. Pre-course exercises afforded students mutual opportunity to reflect upon their career goals and to obtain first hand information about the life, activities, and duties of the school principal.

Twenty-two of thirty students completed a questionnaire that provided insights into their personal activities in building and/or participating in foundational activities germane to the establishment of a "professional community". All respondents to the survey agreed thattheir enrollment in this distance degree program expanded and deepened their understandings of the professional and personal qualities needed by successful teachers and school leaders.

Sixty-eight percent of respondents indicated that they had become active and involved in activities and initiatives at their school site or within their school district. While a majority of respondents indicated that they might have been involved in similar activities without benefit of the cohort program, twenty-seven student respondents indicated that the cohort program served as a catalyst for their eventual involvements. Fifty students characterized their roles in activities and initiatives as being one of "leadership". Involvement in selected activities served to boost the confidence, competence, and sense of efficacy in a significant number of the respondents, many of whom attributed their

success to the knowledge base and the interaction provided through a cooperative and supportive distance cohort degree program.

The cooperative nature and design of this distance degree program and the lessons learned from professionals interacting cooperatively and thoughtfully with each other for the improvement of teacher and principal competencies and of student achievement is perhaps best captured in the observations of Louis et al (1996b) who observe:

> The finding that evaluations of the climate and collegial resources available are associated with professional community adds weight to the argument that the structural elements of "restructuring" have received excessive emphasis in many reform proposals, while the need to improve culture, climate, and interpersonal relationships in schools has received too little attention (p.178).

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